

Kites

I started flying kites when I was around 8 years old. The learning process was a new experience for me at that time - it is best described as an "internship" with more experienced, older kids in the neighborhood. Initially, I would usually be assigned non-crucial, peripheral jobs (like holding the spindle, etc) while the more experienced flyer would assume primary charge. Within a few weeks however, I was allowed to control a flying kite, and after a few more weeks, I finally achieved the most complicated part of kite flying - the process of getting the kite airborne.

For many kids, kite flying was a social exercise, yet another reason to get together, and for many, it was a competitive sport (kite fights). For me however, the other attractions of kite flying mattered more. I was fascinated by the way I could control an object that was hundreds of feet away from me and I never ceased to be thrilled at the ways a simple twitch of my hand on the kite-string would translate into an elaborate motion in the far away kite. Later, when I started programming computers, I would feel a very similar thrill when a simple change of a conditional statement would cause intricate and complicated changes in a program behavior.

While most of the other kids tried daredevil stunts with their kites (eg: swooping down as far as possible towards the ground, and then reversing direction at the last moment), I spent a lot of time to keep the kite as steady as possible. I would be immensely happy with myself if I could keep the kite stationary in the sky for a reasonably long time. For this, I would be trying to feel the tension in the string constantly, since I knew that a change in the tension was a precursor of the kite changing direction. It was a constant "feedback loop", with any change in tension requiring corrective action from me. The concept of feedback came back once again, years later in college when I started to learn about robotics - and when the first example that came to my mind in the control engineering course at college was my experience with kites.

Feedback was also important while trying to make the kite airborne. It was almost like a continuous dialogue between the kite and its flyer – the flyer would pull in the string by a bit to make the kite go higher, then release the string again as the kite caught a gust of wind, pull it back again as it lost height, and this to and fro movement continued till the kite reached its desired height.

Perhaps this kind of tight "feedback loop" led many of us to treat the kite flyer and the kite together as if they were parts of a single system. We would not say "Make the kite go up", instead, we would excitedly shout - "Go up!! Go left!! No! More to the left!" All of us knew that in reality we meant that the kite should go up or left, but merging the flyer and the "flyee" seemed more natural. I would see this again when I would come across video games, where the object on the screen became an extension of the player.

At the end of the day, while going home after a round of kite flying, I would often wonder - how does the world look from the point of view of the kite? Can it touch the clouds? Can it see the entire city all at once? How does the wind "feel" for it? How do the birds react to it? I was not giving human or animal attributes to the kite – but I was trying to project myself into the point of view of the kite and see the world from its vantage point. It was an object for me that let me jump off into yet another flight of fancy. (Nowadays when I see people attaching digital cameras to their kites – I have a feeling that the spark for this idea came from similar flights of fancies they had)

I still wonder – what was it that led to my fascination with kites? While I never thought of the kite as being alive, it had a certain attribute of "tangible interactivity" which I had never experienced before. Apart from the tactile "feedback loop" that I have mentioned earlier, the kite seemed to exhibit its own will and I had a certain power to control, manipulate and even play with this will. This created an experience I had never had before with any other inanimate object. The gentle tug in the kite-string was what originally led me to try out kite flying, and the most exciting

part of my kite flying learning process was when I held the spindle of a flying kite in between my fingers for the first time, and it started to rotate automatically, letting out and unfurling the string. I remember having a very similar feeling when my first computer program ran, asked my name, and printed “Hello Sayamindu” in response. Just as with the kite, I knew that the computer was inanimate, but in spite of that, it was interacting with me in a personal way.

Of course, I may be stretching the comparison a bit too far. Computers and programming offered me a million or more possibilities, while the kite experience had a limited scope. But still, I feel that it offered a valuable experience for me at that age. It was indeed, my first experience with an “interactive” system. It was also a very close and personal “interaction”, as the relationship between the kite and me was restricted to only me. No one else could feel the subtle change in tension in the string; no one else could fathom the feeling of the string going up slowly (as the kite rose up), whatever happened was between only me and my kite. That was what made the experience so wonderful, and that’s what made the experience jump out even today, among the hundred others that I had during my childhood.

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